The Post Season To-Do List for Deer Managers
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With the passing of 2020 and the closing of deer season, the new year marks the time to get busy. There are many tasks that need to be completed now that deer hunting is not the top priority. If you are like me, you are looking for a reason to stay on the land and out of the house anyway. I have also noticed that my post season to-do lists are always much more enjoyable than the honey-do list my lovely bride assembled while I was hiding in trees picking off does. Seriously, organize the attic (for absolutely no logical reason) or move deer stands to be more effective come fall. I'll take the briars, brambles, and hard work over “move this here and that over there” any day. Let’s discuss a few things that fit well into the post season and keep you on the land and out of the house.

Immediately after deer season ends is the ideal time to conduct deer population surveys in South Carolina. Food resources have become more limited at this point. Deer are spending more time searching for food, and cold weather requires considerable food intake to maintain body temperatures. These factors, combined with the lack of sight blocking vegetation, provide a great opportunity to count deer. Post season monitoring of the deer herd allows us to determine which bucks we will be carrying into the following season. We can get a gist of our doe herd and roughly estimate the number of fawns that will be hitting the ground in a few more months. Trail camera and spotlight surveys are both valuable tools for assessing the herd. Spotlight surveys are simple to conduct and provide valuable information on the overall number of deer remaining in the population. Population numbers derived from spotlight surveys provide valuable information for determining if harvest numbers for the previous season were sufficient or if we need to increase or decrease overall harvest for the following season. Trail camera surveys allow the manager to get a close look at the deer herd. Unlike spotlight surveys, trail camera surveys allow us to look closely at individual animals. They allow us to really focus on body condition, age classes, and sex ratios. Both trail camera and spotlight surveys provide vital information on habitat use and identification of important resources. Seeing where deer are concentrated identifies not only valuable habitat but also indicates other areas that may need habitat improvement. The good folks at Texas Parks and Wildlife put together great documents on how to conduct spotlight surveys and trail camera surveys, and they can be found at the following links: https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_rp_w7000_1126.pdf and https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_br_w7000_1444.pdf.

If you are serious about deer hunting, then you understand how valuable scouting in January can be. You now have a chance to take a close look at your property and clearly see how the deer are using the landscape without fear of spooking the animals. January provides a view of the landscape without fear of spooking the animals. The deciduous leaves are gone, the growing season vegetation has fallen to the ground, and all but the thickest of vegetation offer a wide-open view. Deer trails become very clear, and the ability to see travel paths extends much further than during the season. Now is a great time to break out the GPS and go walk the trails. I have found it to be most insightful over the years. Using the track log features of most GPS devices, you simply walk each trail as far as possible in each direction and then upload the data to your preferred mapping software. The more trails you map, the clearer the image you will have of how deer move across the landscape.

Ever wondered why the once productive box stands or food plots are no longer producing deer? Ever noticed the food plots are hit hard but never seeing deer while hunting? Try walking around the outside of the food plots and note the trail usage. It may take several laps at wider and wider paths to locate the change, but you will find it. Deer figure out where the danger lies and they use their nose to protect them. Deer move trails over time for many reasons, but a commonly observed reason is to by-pass the danger of hunters. They develop travel routes that allow them to check the safety of food plots and
other areas without having to leave the safety of cover. Identifying these changes to travel paths allows the repositioning of stands to account for the change. If a stand has been in place for more than 3 or 4 seasons, deer have developed new patterns to account for the danger. Slight adjustments typically allow the hunter to continue hunting the same spot but from a slightly different view. Taking the time to get these stands right can pay off big in the upcoming season.

January is also a great time to stop dreaming about that soft mast orchard and make it happen. More and more options seem to be available each year. Numerous online suppliers and the South Carolina Forestry Commission (https://www.state.sc.us/forest/nur.htm) provide seedlings with mail delivery options that make it simple. When planning your orchard, consider what species are naturally present on the property and their abundance. This will help you determine which species would best supplement the available resources. Fortunately for the land manager, many soft masts species are available in numerous cultivars. Spend a little time looking at these cultivars’ ripening times and consider planting multiple cultivars to extend the period fruits are available each year. By planting in this fashion for several different species of soft mast producers, the manager can have longer reaching influence on food availability.

I would venture to say if you are reading this article, then deer aren’t the only critters you are interested in managing. I bet you have spent a little time reviewing trail cam pictures seemingly filled with raccoons on corn piles. The ole masked bandits get fat and sassy from August – January, living within eyesight of a corn pile that magically reappears as soon as it is gone. You must ask yourself, am I creating a problem by feeding these major nest predators so well? What do all these ring-tailed magicians do for food when we aren’t feeding them? Put me on record; there is no better predator of ground-nesting birds in North America. It is hard to imagine how many eggs raccoons take every year. Having researched nest success in the past, I have a hard time imagining how any ground-nesting birds still exist in South Carolina. I realize trapping animals is a controversial topic, a topic that I can respect strong points from both sides. Legally, one can trap raccoons during the trapping season set by SCDNR. Trapping licensing information and trapping information can be found here: https://www.dnr.sc.gov/regs/furharvest.html. Having managed for turkeys and quail for over 20 years now, I feel that nest predator management is a requirement.

Hopefully, this article provides you with the ammunition needed to get you back on the land and out of the house. There are thousands of things one can do this time of year to improve habitat, foster conservation, and expand one’s knowledge of the critters they are managing. I will leave you with a list of additional tasks you may want to consider now that the season is over.

Winter Activity List

- Prescribed burns
- Winter disking for native vegetation
- Wood duck nest box inspections and shaving replacement
- Songbird nest box inspections and shaving replacement
- Hedgerow plantings to break up large fields
- Tractor and equipment maintenance
- Property line marking
- Supplemental bluegill and forage fish stockings
- Privet control
- Deer stand repairs/replacements
- Assemble spring supplemental planting list and seed orders

This article was featured in CU IN THE WOODS Winter 2021 Edition, you can view the full newsletter at: https://www.clemson.edu/extension/forestry/newsletter/newsletter_files/2021-winter-forestry-newsletter

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